

Hunting the Wild Mushroom

Contributed by Victor Kramer
Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2006

Most Americans regard wild mushrooms with deep suspicion, ever weary of the poisonous varieties. Not so the French, who can spot a prime chanterelle or lactaire in just about anybody's backyard.

If it's the early bird that catches the worm, in France it's only the early mushroom hunter who's going to bring home a basket of mushrooms wild and free. After the rains of September and October, French families by the thousands start early in the morning to scour woods and meadows for girolles (yellow/orange chanterelles familiar to diners in trendy American restaurants), cepes (the prized *Boletus edulis* you now find dried on US grocery shelves), lactaires (edible in spite of the milky liquid they exude when cut or bruised), and other tasty species.

If you are an experienced US mushroom hunter, you've probably been spoiled by lack of competition, since most Americans regard wild mushrooms with deep suspicion. "You mean you actually eat those things?" say homeowners when asked permission to pick goodies growing on their lawn. In a way the US is a mushroomer's paradise. (My wife and I once found perfect, young chanterelles, bright, shining orange on the forest floor, right alongside a well-hiked trail in Maine. Crawling on all fours in the rain we gathered an omelet's worth, which I later cooked in cream on our sailboat's alcohol stove... it just doesn't get any better.) You're unlikely to have such luck in France or, for that matter, in Europe.

Wild mushrooms are a major obsession here, and especially in hilly regions like Provence, the Ardeche and the foothills of the Alps and Pyrenees, mushrooms have become a cottage industry. They're picked not only for immediate home consumption (they keep only a few days at best, even in the fridge) but also for sale fresh in street markets and even supermarkets, which carry them fresh, frozen, dried or canned. Savvy pickers can earn 500 francs or more a day, and sought-after species of wild mushrooms retail for over 100 FF (\$20) a kilo (2.2 lbs.). Most mushroom hunters in France learned to tell good from bad in childhood on family forays -- a favorite weekend activity, summer and fall. But folk knowledge generally focuses on recognizing for sure only a few species -- the very, very good, and the very, very bad.

For the dozens of species in between, there are illustrated guidebooks and/or you can join other mycologists (fancy word for students of mushrooms and fungi) in a local club. If you're a member of a US mycological society, or a self-taught, experienced mushroom hunter, you may want to try your luck in France during late summer or fall.

Assuming there have been some extended periods of rain in the preceding weeks -- you can tell who mushroom hunters are, because they smile at weather forecasts that send others into depression -- get up early, try to cajole the hotel concierge into telling you where the locals hunt, and if possible equip yourself with a good guidebook on local mushrooms, with clear, color illustrations. In some areas, you may need a permit to pick mushrooms on public lands. (I'm not telling you to break the law, but it's unlikely anyone would get very upset at your picking a few mushrooms for your own use; the permits are mainly to regulate commercial picking). You may notice that locals tend to go after only a few marketable species, ignoring others that are perfectly edible. But keep in mind that some European mushrooms differ in cap color or other characteristics from their American cousins belonging to the same species or variety. So don't rely too much on your knowledge of American mushrooms.

Here are four ways to play it safe: Use a common-sense rule: put into the basket only those mushrooms you've positively identified, comparing them to descriptions and photos in guide books. Since you're sure to meet local mushroom pickers, ask them to confirm that what's in your basket is "comestible" (edible). If in doubt, remember that in France every pharmacist has to pass a course on mushroom identification. Do as the French do: bring a couple of samples of each type of mushroom you picked to a local druggist. Since you're unlikely to be traveling with a stove, frying pan and olive oil, you'll have to ask your hotel or restaurant to cook up the mushrooms for you. For a small price, they'll probably agree to do it -- and in the process do a further check on what you've picked. Of course, there's an even safer way: order wild mushrooms -- or one of the few species such as oyster mushrooms ("pleurotes") that are now cultivated -- from a restaurant menu.

When wild mushrooms are in season, you'll find them in most restaurants -- as an appetizer or side dish, grilled, sauteed or in a sauce to accompany fish or meat. Especially wonderful: "cepes en persillade" (meaty slices of *boletus edulis* quickly sauteed in olive oil, with garlic and parsley) "confit de canard aux cepes" (preserved duck stewed with cepes) "pleurotes grilles" (oyster mushrooms brushed with olive oil and grilled on charcoal) "oeufs aux girolles" (omelet or, better yet, soft scrambled eggs with chanterelles). "morilles farcies" (stuffed baked morels -- a springtime treat, since morels only grow in spring and early summer) Besides being good eating, wild mushrooms give you a good reason to

explore the sweet rolling hills of the French countryside. Near Paris you can wander along the network of paths in the woodland parks of Versailles or Fontainebleau, or parks near other chateaux in Ile de France or the Loire valley.

Mushrooming offers the outdoor joys of hunting without the killing, and the solitary joys of fishing without the equipment and the wet. And mushrooms, unlike game or fish, can be found without making a long drive by car. That may help explain why in France, where gas costs three or four times US prices, interest in mushroom hunting is, well . . . mushrooming.

Copyright (c) 1998 Paris New Media, L.L.C. Victor Kramer learned about mushrooms as a child in Italy, then reconnected to mushrooming during a New Hampshire summer 35 years ago. He's been at it ever since in New England (where he was a member of the Boston Mycological Society) and since 1988 in France.